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ABSTRACT

This paper describes NU Start, a summer learning community program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for first-year students of the English department and the University Library faculty. NU Start offered 4 sections of an Introduction to Literature course, each with 13 or 14 students. In addition, all students took a one-hour, self-paced Library course. English classes met for nearly 3 hours daily for 14 days. In the afternoons, students attended study skills seminars and worked on their library course; there were two to three mandatory study hours each evening. Students lived in a campus residence hall, spent their weekends at various cultural and other events, and participated in community-building activities. In evaluating the program, coordinators found that fewer students were recruited than planned, in part because financial aid was lacking and cutoff scores were too high; no students of color enrolled. In evaluating the academic component of the program, it was found that most students were satisfied with their English class but less positive about the library course. The study skills seminars were a failure. Evaluation of the learning community component found that students bonded very quickly and were satisfied with the residence and each another. Students appreciated team- and confidence-building activities. (SM)

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It seems self-evident that the main outcome of a learning community ought to be learning, and student learning was certainly uppermost in the minds of those who planned and taught the first offering of NU Start in the summer of 1998. However, the faculty and staff of NU Start probably learned as much from the experience as did the students. In this presentation, I will explain what we learned, hoping both to help others and to elicit feedback that will help us do better in the future.

First, a brief overview of the program. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln is a comprehensive research land grant and AAU university of about 25,000 students, part of a system that includes two other, mainly undergraduate, campuses and a medical center. Though UNL enrolls students from all over the United States and dozens of other nations, the overwhelming majority of undergraduates are from Nebraska.

NU Start came about at the urging of Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Nancy Stara, Director of Summer Sessions at UNL. Inspired by the Summer Start program at Cornell University and the Intensive Summer Seminars at Indiana University, she proposed the notion of a summer program for incoming first-year students to the English department and the University Library faculty, and recruited Ms. Deborah Johnson from the office of General Studies to coordinate the community aspect of the program. She then allowed the faculty and staff organize the program with full support but no administrative interference.

NU Start offered four sections of English 180, Introduction to Literature, each with 13 or 14 students. In addition, all students took the one-hour, self-paced Library 110 course required by most undergraduate colleges at UNL. The English classes met for two hours and fifty minutes per day for fourteen days. In the afternoons, the students attended study skills seminars and worked on their library course. They had 2-3 mandatory study hours each evening. They lived and took their meals in a residence hall centrally located on the UNL campus, and had access to quiet study rooms, group work rooms, and a computer lab. The students spent the first Saturday of the course at a campground near Lincoln participating in the Ropes Challenge course. On the second Saturday, students, staff, and faculty visited the henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha. The community also attended a jazz concert, part of the Summer Arts program, a play at the Nebraska Repertory Theater, and a session with a Native American storyteller. Ms. Johnson, four Student Assistants, and the students themselves organized other activities, such as a photo-scavenger hunt on campus, a movie night, laser-tag, a visit to the UNL observatory, an exercise circuit at the Campus Recreation center, and dinner at a Japanese restaurant.

That summarizes what we did. What did we learn?

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Recruitment

- We aimed at a cadre of 100 students but recruited only 54. The program demanded a sacrifice of the late summer for the students, and even more a financial sacrifice, since they or their parents had to make up-front payments for tuition, fees, room and board, and books. We had no scholarship money available, and we were not able to extend financial aid benefits back into the summer. These problems will be addressed for the 1999 NU Start.

- We wished to recruit able and motivated students who fell just below the cutoff point for entrance into the UNL Honors Program. Ultimately we opened up recruitment to high-promise students and wound up with an average ACT score of 27 and a pleasing diversity of students with composite ACT scores ranging from 19 to 33. Six of our students ranked first in their high school graduating class. Since all 54 students were academically successful in the program, we may not need to limit future recruiting.

- The NU Start students themselves noted with some dismay that there was not a single student of color among them. They had no way of knowing that the minority portion of all undergraduates at UNL is under 5%. Nonetheless, their desire for greater diversity was healthy, and we need to recruit students of color more aggressively. In other ways the cadre was reasonably diverse. Women outnumbered men in the program 33-21. Twelve students graduated from a senior class under 60 students. One student was sight-impaired.

Academics

- In an exit questionnaire, 90% or more of the students expressed satisfaction with their English class in terms of learning, challenge, and preparation for future university courses. They were less positive about the library course (one generally and perhaps understandably not popular with students), but 76% rendered the opinion that they had learned how to use the university's library system. All 54 students passed the library course, a record unequaled by any previous cadre of Library 110 students.

- The English department decided to offer in NU Start a standard course in our curriculum rather than a freshman composition course or a new thematic seminar. Since English 180 is accepted nearly universally at UNL for humanities credit, the students not only earned hours toward graduation but partly or completely fulfilled a general education requirement.

- The four English instructors, all very experienced at teaching first-year students, met regularly during the spring semester before NU Start until one of us gave birth to her first child. We established some common readings and goals and a shared sense of the scope of the course. Still we struggled between the urge to coordinate tightly the work of the four NU Start sections and the desire to retain classroom autonomy. We perhaps erred on the side of autonomy. The workload of one section was considerably greater than that of the other three,

causing a morale problem among students in a very close community. Moreover there was not quite enough commonality among the assignments to take full advantage of the community we were working with. I hope to establish a more integrated set of readings and assignments in the coming year without impinging on the style of individual instructors. Such an integration, plus a more defined set of goals, will allow for a formal assessment of learning outcomes, missing in the first NU Start offering.

- So far as I know, no one at UNL in recent memory had attempted to teach a full class of first-year students in a three-hour daily format, and certainly English 180 had never been taught that way. We worried that the students' attention would lag or wander. As it turned out, our fears were groundless. The students were easily up to the challenge. The long classes provided many opportunities for inventive classroom work, however the 14-day duration of the course was a problem we didn't fully overcome. It focused attention on day-to-day work and inhibited engaging the students in long-range projects. Thus, for example, we did not link the work in English effectively with the library course, even though the library faculty instructor tailored his course assignments to the study of literature.

- The students were far better than any of us had expected on the basis of our experience in randomly-enrolled first-year classes. Problems with attendance and lateness simply did not exist. Students did their reading and writing on time and did them well. The students in my class, without my help, chose and rehearsed overnight scenes from the play *Crimes of the Heart* and presented them in class the next day with appropriate staging and both moving and hilarious effectiveness. These results may in part be due to the self-selection of the program by motivated students, but it is also clear that their community created work standards to which all adhered without question or complaint.

- We hired an advanced graduate student to open the Writing Center and visit the residence hall for several hours a week (the Writing Center normally being closed over the summer). Few students took advantage of this resource, though the ones that did were very satisfied with the help they received.

- The study skills seminars held on several afternoons were a failure. These students already had well-developed study habits, and the instruction they received on note-taking and tests had little relevance to their NU Start courses. With student help, we hope to re-focus these seminars toward subjects more useful to the participants.

Community

- I have been involved in learning communities before, but the tightness of the NU Start community was simply astonishing. The students were prepared for the experience with several mailings, and we set up a web site introducing the faculty and courses. The students arrived on Sunday afternoon with over 100

relatives, moved into the residence hall, and attended a two-hour orientation, while their parents and relatives attended a separate one. The day culminated with a meal in the hall dining room. The students, who arrived first, chose to sit together even when their family members arrived. When the meal was over, the students went off to a meeting with hardly a backward glance, leaving behind pleased but somewhat bewildered parents. The bond grew even stronger over three weeks, ending with another banquet, again attended by parents, where the students all received NU Start backpacks and engaged in impromptu speeches and performances. These relatively modest rituals were important in the creation of a true community.

- On the exit questionnaire, the students expressed near-unanimous satisfaction with their experience in the residence halls and with one another. The cooperation of the director and staff of the residence halls in providing facilities, equipment, and meals for the students was outstanding.

- Since the regular residence hall assistants were unavailable in the late summer, we hired four mature undergraduates who had been hosts throughout the summer at New Student Enrollment. Hard-working, creative, and dependable, they were an invaluable asset to the program. They provided excellent mentoring while entering into the fun the participants needed during three busy weeks.

- It very quickly became evident that a presentation on sexuality was in order, and an expert from the University Health Center was asked to conduct an evening meeting. Far from being annoyed or abashed, the students expressed their appreciation for the session and suggested that it be scheduled in the first few days of the next NU Start offering.

- The students found the Ropes Challenge course, a set of events to build community and confidence, extremely valuable; and they responded very positively to the cultural experience of the Japanese restaurant. The jazz concert, featuring a professional singer who is also a Ph.D. student in the English department, was well received. The play, a fairly fluffy comedy, was enjoyable; but the students found it a bit thin. They would have been happier with something more challenging. Moreover the sight gags in the play were lost on our blind student. The Native American story-telling might better have come earlier in the course. It was a low-key event in a hectic final week.

- The English faculty met formally once a week during the course, along with Ms. Johnson, to discuss the classes and individual students. Faculty also attended the opening and closing banquets and the cultural events. In the coming year, I would like to have faculty visit students in the residence hall on occasion. Since they come to "our place" every day, we should meet them on their ground as well.

- One student suffered a death in his immediate family during NU Start. He was supported beautifully by the staff, his teacher, and his fellow students; and he returned from the funeral to finish the course.

- We had planned to select an advisory board to plan the next offering of NU Start, but before we could mention it to the students they made the suggestion themselves. When the idea was formally proposed, 25 out of 54 students volunteered to serve on the board. We chose a smaller number, obviously; but the enthusiasm was heartening. Some students have already engaged actively in recruiting, and the program has received several inquiries even before its announcement to admitted freshmen.

- We held a reunion of the NU Start group late one afternoon of the final, busy weeks of the semester. Over thirty attended.

The Future

- We will track the first cadre of NU Start participants (and future ones as well), measuring retention and taking into account predictors of success before the NU Start experience.

- In 1999, we are aiming at an enrollment of 120, offering four English sections and two sections of Introduction to Sociology. If the program expands as we have planned, the costs grow as well, and logistics and the difficulty of coordination become more complex. We believe, however, that we must build on the satisfaction of our first students in order to sustain the program over a number of years.

- Finally, anyone who has taught for a number of years has learned that what works in one class may not work as well in the next. The same is true of learning communities. A community is a complex and delicate organism, especially one that must be formed and become functional in a short period of time. Thus the opportunity for discovery by the faculty and staff of a learning community is endless.